

BUT I'M A CHEERLEADER

Comedy. Starring Natasha Lyonne and Clea DuVall. Directed by Jamie Babbit.

Jamie Babbit's first feature film is a John Waters-influenced, off-the-wall comedy that brilliantly blends humor with romance as a young girl finds the courage to be herself. Megan (Natasha Lyonne) has it all. She's a popular, pretty, model student who dates the captain of the football team. And, if that isn't enough, she's a cheerleader! Everyone would envy her--if she wasn't so likable. But, it all comes to a screaming halt. Just as the football team is about to go to the playoffs, Megan walks right into a rude surprise: a group intervention, led by her parents, to force her to admit that she's a homosexual. The evidence is overwhelming: She's a vegetarian, she doesn't like kissing her boyfriends, she idolizes Melissa Etheridge, and she likes to hug her friends. She's whisked off to True Directions, a five-step homo-rehab camp, where Mike (played by out-of-drag RuPaul) tries to change her ways. Megan is the perfect student at the "conversion" camp but doesn't believe she's gay--until she meets Graham (Clea DuVall), a sexy rich tomboy who has no intention of rehabbing, though she fears that daddy will cut her off. Megan begins to question everything she's been told. Can all those accusations about her deviant sexuality be true? But I'm a Cheerleader uses surreal, highly aestheticized set designs, including luridly feminine color schemes for the girls and an amusing collection of hyper-masculine activities for the boys, to speak to society's continuing homophobia, and it sparkles with an in-your-face radicalism and laugh-out-loud humor. (1999, USA, 35 mm, 81 min.)

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"But I'm a Cheerleader" is funny, but it's not only funny. Though colorful and campy, the picture manages to make a heartfelt statement about the difficulties of growing up gay.

Natasha Lyonne plays a 17-year-old cheerleader whom family and friends suspect is a lesbian. One day these concerned parties intervene, and young Megan is sent off to New Directions, a camp designed to deprogram teenagers of their gay tendencies.

Everything at New Directions is in one of two colors -- hot pink for the girls, baby blue for the boys. The art direction is clever and eye-catching, though it's the logo of the institution that says it all. It's an arrow that goes in a circle. The camp may be designed to change people's sexual orientation, but it leaves them exactly where they came in.

The first step in the five-step process is for the inmates to fess up. In a group-therapy scene, all of Megan's fellow inmates stand up and say, "I am a homosexual" -- and somehow each confession is funny in a different way. Yet it's a measure of the movie's double edge that when the scene ends with Megan making the realization about herself, it's not just amusing but odd. Megan had no idea she was gay. So when she says, "I'm a homosexual," it's with a mixture of relief and horror.

Lyonne is wonderful, up to the demands of both the comedy and the sentiment, and she is well matched by Clea DuVall as Graham, a sullen young woman who doesn't share Megan's cheerleader optimism. This is one light comedy whose seriousness, hours later, lingers in the mind.

- - - Mick LaSalle (San Francisco Chronicle)

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In this scathing, yet playful, satire of knee-jerk morality, first-time feature director Jamie Babbit concocts a surreal universe where the very real issues of homophobia and the struggles of gay teenagers are handled with vast humor, insight and honesty. Popular cheerleader Megan (Natasha Lyonne) has everything a budding young girl could want but her fanatically middle-class parents (Bud Cort and Mink Stole) suspect she may be a--gasp!--lesbian, and cart her off to "True Directions," a rehabilitation camp where she is to have the joys of heterosexual womanhood pounded into her, so to speak. Though she's initially flabbergasted by the accusation, Megan finds her real "true direction" through sexy tomboy Graham (Clea Duvall) and leads a coup against the camp's head homophobe, Mary, played with a loony zest for thick-skulled evil by Cathy Moriarty.

Against True Directions' hilariously nightmarish backdrop of sex-specificity (the girls scrub floors in a pink kitchen while the boys play football in bright blue overalls), Babbit plays with all the familiar stereotypes, from the limp-wristed fairy to the gruff bulldyke, easily showing how inane society's automatic judgments of gay people can be without overtly laying blame on anyone for the often tragic results of such judgments.

In direct counterpoint to the weepy AIDS epics and gentle coming-out stories of the last two decades, Babbit also runs roughshod over the politically correct tenets of gay victimhood, and none too soon. While it tends toward simplistic cartoonishness, "But I'm a Cheerleader" is a long-awaited harbinger of raucous empowerment from a brash new generation of gay filmmakers who can laugh at both themselves and the crazy world around them without a hint of defeat or bitterness. Now that's liberation.

- - - Rob Campbell (ifilm.com)

